

LÁSZLÓ DÁNYI

NAT TURNER: HISTORY THAT FICTION MAKES, OR FICTION  
THAT HISTORY MAKES?

“History is indeed an  
argument without end.”  
(Pieter Geyl)<sup>1</sup>

My essay aims to analyze to what extent William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* can be a clue to history, and how fictionalized, and/or historical the Turner figure is. Examining the relationship between the Turner of history and the Turner of imaginative recreation raises the question of where the boundary between fiction and history is.

First I want to describe the age when the book was written, and to illustrate the controversy around Turner's fictional interpretation in Styron's book. Secondly, I wish to delineate the parameters of historical knowledge about Nat Turner, and, finally, to examine how he radiates over history and fiction.

My presupposition is that a writer is historically situated, and thus his work expresses the sensibility of the age. William Styron's controversial text was written in the 60s, in the age of upheavals when a radical rearrangement of priorities contributed to the establishment of the image

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Disuniting of America* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1992) 57.

that the 60s were “youth oriented, radical, counter cultural, easy-riding, committed to New Left ideology, minority rights, black consciousness, and to drugs, rock music, psychedelic experiences, protest and dissent.”<sup>2</sup>

This shift also brought about more varied and more subtle answers to the uneasy questions of the black experience in America’s belligerent past, and in order to establish a more favorable image of black Americans, a radical revision of this group’s past was necessary. I think in the process of remedying a negative heritage the need for cultural heroes, of which Nat Turner could be one, was becoming more pronounced, and more and more elements of black culture penetrated into the dominant white culture.

Southern blacks, who tried to manipulate the mass media and using civil disobedience as a tactic, won the support of the northern public and obtained legal representation through public-interest law firms and, to boost race consciousness, they created their own mythic cultural heroes. These processes led to the revival of the Nat Turner image by interpreting him as a freedom fighter. During the Second Reconstruction of the 1960s Nat Turner and his slave revolt were revalued because the “slave revolt was justified on the familiar basis of resisting legal but oppressive forces: the cruelties of slavery in Virginia (on a moral basis). Nat Turner’s tough defiance in a hostile white world was the stuff of black heroism with no need for moral justification. Glorified ‘social bandits’ have long served significant psychological, sociological and mythological functions for those who feel frustrated, victimized and powerless,”<sup>3</sup> which is a type of social myth therapy.

Styron started to write *The Confessions* because he wished to express the subtlety and the complexity of this emerging black heritage and thus of the slave past, especially the latter’s complexity. He accepted György Lukács’s principles on writing historical novels, and viewed the disregard of

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel Snowman and Malcolm Bradbury, “The Sixties and Seventies,” *Introduction to American Studies*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury & Howard Temperley (London & New York: Longman, 1981) 326.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Reagan Wilson and William Ferris, coeds., *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989) 1491—1492.

facts as a state of grace. He asserted that the writer should not permit his work to be governed by particular historical facts.<sup>4</sup>

Soon after the publication of the novel he gave a brief talk at Wilberforce University, one of the all-black universities in the North. In that talk he expressed his hope that “an increased awareness of the history of the Negro..., especially of Negro slavery, would allow people of both races to come to terms with the often inexplicable turmoil of the present.”<sup>5</sup>

Extremist views opposing Styron’s unruffled opinion sprang up in the 60s, and they still persist. Styron rejected extremity favoring black militancy and I think this might be one of the reasons why he received hostile criticism from some black critics. To some extent, to him Nat Turner was the black militant of the 60s who used civil disobedience as his weapon.

After some initial favorable criticism, in 1968 the first major attack came from ten black writers who published their critique of Styron’s book in a collection of essays entitled *William Styron’s Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*. The polemic book starts with a quote from Herbert Aptheker: “History’s potency is mighty. The oppressed need it for identity and inspiration: oppressors for justification, rationalization, and legitimacy.”<sup>6</sup>

Editor John Henrik Clarke’s introduction attacks Styron’s book for not being true to the documents, and for not describing Nat Turner’s “true” character. According to the introduction, Turner’s “true” character is the black rebel hero who has a wife and realizes the situation of the oppressed blacks and leads their uprising. The introduction accuses Styron of dehumanizing Turner and all the other blacks, and of presenting Turner as a stereotypical character. Subsequently all the ten black critics argue against Styron’s Turner by insisting on their idea of a stereotypical “tragic-triumphant”<sup>7</sup> hero, but they themselves hold the misconception they rebel against.

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<sup>4</sup> William Styron, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993) 440.

<sup>5</sup> Styron, 434.

<sup>6</sup> Arthur D. Casciato and James L. W. West III, eds., *Critical Essays on William Styron* (Boston: GK Hall and Co., 1982) 201–202.

<sup>7</sup> John Henrik Clarke, ed., *William Styron’s Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968) 25.

They accept Thomas Gray's interpretation as being the only true account on the rebellion. Gray, a court-appointed lawyer, visited Turner in his cell before his execution and wrote a 7000-word document on the confessions of Nat Turner. But I think Thomas Gray's interpretation is his own personal interpretation, even though on its cover page it claims to be an authentic account. Gray quotes Turner's own words to make the account authentic, but on the one hand Gray thinks Turner has the impression that he does not believe him and Turner says, "I see sir, you doubt my words."<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, Gray's account is not free from his personal bias regarding Turner's behavior. His interpretation can be the primary one, but it is neither better nor worse, neither truer nor falsier than any other interpretation that has been written so far, including one from Styron's pen.

What are the major points made against Styron in the subsequent essays? Styron is "trying to escape history"<sup>9</sup> and shows a "neurasthenic, Hamlet-like white intellectual in black face,"<sup>10</sup> Styron's Turner is always "dreaming of white thighs,"<sup>11</sup> "black people rebel primarily because of an unfulfilled psychological need to be white."<sup>12</sup> Moreover Styron entered "starkly white into a black man's skin and mind,"<sup>13</sup> he lost the "religious center"<sup>14</sup> in Turner's life, he cannot understand the "Afro-American psyche."<sup>15</sup>

These ten black critics were closely linked to magazines like *Freedomways*, *Negro Digest*, and *Ebony*, which suggests their attachment to a very important aspect of the Black Power Movement in the 1960s. This aspect is the psychological precondition for equality which "fostered a new sense of radical pride and self-confidence that helped revolutionize the black

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 19—20.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

perspective, confining to the dustbin of the African—American past the belief born out of centuries of oppression that what was white was good and what was black was inferior”.<sup>16</sup>

More recent criticism of Styron’s Nat Turner has become more subtle. Robert N. Fossum regards it as being “a ‘kind of religious allegory’ in which ‘Old Testament savagery and rage’ are converted at the last into ‘New Testament grace and redemption’.”<sup>17</sup> Marc L. Ratner analyzes the violent opposition of Nat Turner to society which is inhabited with representative characters.<sup>18</sup> Shaun O’Connell admits that the novel should be as disturbing to white liberals as to black militants because Nat Turner did what he had to.<sup>19</sup> John Thomson writes the following about the validity of the novel: “all we know for certain, considering now the truths of art rather than the blessings of politics or religion, is that from time to time men will rise and slay, if not the oppressor, then whosoever lies at hand in the oppressor’s likeness.”<sup>20</sup> A few years after the publication of *Ten Black Writers Respond*, Mike Thelwell, one of the ten black writers, still insisted on the existence of a specific black consciousness into which Styron’s Turner does not fit.<sup>21</sup> He attacks the novel for its racism and the implication of Nat Turner’s homosexuality. He questions Styron’s eligibility to write in the name of a black hero.

After considering some of the interpretations of Nat Turner as a fictional character, let me present some of the historical views on him. What have American historians written about Nat Turner and his slave companions? Herbert Aptheker, whom Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. defines as “a faithful Stalinist” who “was an old hand at the manipulation of history,”<sup>22</sup> analyzes the transformations of Nat Turner as a historical figure in his book,

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<sup>16</sup> Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993) 202.

<sup>17</sup> Robert H. Fossum, *William Styron, a Critical Essay* (Claremont, Calif.: William B. Eerdmans, 1968) 44.

<sup>18</sup> Marc L. Ratner, *William Styron* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1972) 124.

<sup>19</sup> Arthur D. Casciato, 161.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>22</sup> Schlesinger, 60.

*Nat Turner's Slave Rebellion*.<sup>23</sup> The entire book is a refutation of the view held by Louis Filler, who maintains that the rebellion obstructed the emancipation process in the last century. In the main part of the book Aptheker offers an overview of the stereotypical characteristic features attached to black people and Nat Turner.

In Aptheker's view Nat Turner is a human being who struggles in order to get something precious to human beings—"peace, prosperity, liberty, or, in a word, a greater amount of happiness."<sup>24</sup> He is convinced that Nat Turner "sought the liberation of the negro people"<sup>25</sup>, and the "desire for liberty"<sup>26</sup> was his motive.

After the rebellion slaves were regarded as banditti, blood-thirsty wolves and Frankenstein monsters. A wide-spread view among whites was that God had put blacks on Earth to serve and work for the white man, and this idea of innate inferiority of blacks influenced writers and historians like Sidney Drewry, Robert R. Howison and J. C. Ballagh. However, in their works Nat Turner is labelled "very religious, truthful and honest,"<sup>27</sup> "well-educated"<sup>28</sup>.

In the works of modern scholars the innate inferiority tends to disappear.<sup>29</sup> In the 1940s, Melville J. Herskovits criticizes the view that the tendency to revolt was a sporadic and insignificant phenomenon; however, he devotes only one sentence to the Nat Turner revolt.<sup>30</sup> Twenty years later Lerone Bennett, Jr. emphasizes that Nat Turner was "a preacher with vengeance on his lips, a dreamer, a fanatic, a terrorist,... a fanatic mixture of gentleness, ruthlessness and piety."<sup>31</sup> One of the two drawings provided as

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<sup>23</sup> Herbert Aptheker, *Nat Turner's Slave Rebellion* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1966).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>29</sup> Herbert Aptheker, 6.

<sup>30</sup> Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1941) 98.

<sup>31</sup> Lerone Bennett, Jr., *Before the Mayflower: A History of the Negro in America 1619—1964* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Co., Inc., 1964) 118.

illustrations to the text shows Nat Turner planning the uprising; the other depicts him being captured. The expression of intrepidity on his face, his hand sturdily pointing at something and defiantly holding the dagger with which he is willing to fight against the white man bearing a gun introduce him as an exceptional man, intensifying his freedom-fighter image. Styron's interpretation about the same event is different, because in the book Nat politely requests Mr. Phipps "not to shoot."<sup>32</sup>

John Hope Franklin, the outstanding black historian whose moderate tone establishes balance in his writing, analyses the aftermath of the slave revolt in his *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans*. He argues that on the one hand the situation was exaggerated in many white communities and most states strengthened their Slave Codes, on the other hand white persons offered assistance and encouragement to blacks.<sup>33</sup>

Comparing the lists of interpretations I conclude the following about the ramifications of my question:

Firstly, on the one hand in Styron's novel history makes fiction in a way that Nat Turner is a historical figure, and for the author he is the starting point from where the Turner figure charged with Styron's imagination radiates into fictional space. The 1960s are the other factor of history which confines the historical background against which the highly fictionalized Turner is positioned.

The lack of any real historical knowledge makes it possible for Styron to take liberties with his character. Thus he employs the first person singular narration, and by using this form he manages to create the personal atmosphere and the confessional mode in the novel. He portrays Turner, who has an errand, as a bachelor with all the attendant frustrations. Turner in the novel is shown as a human being torn by his doubts and fears, and his fictional projection does not fit the fictional and ideologized hero mould. The fictional extension of the character allows me to interpret him as a human being who is not necessarily black or white, and is not only from the 19th century or the 1960s. I assume that Styron identifies broader

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<sup>32</sup> Styron, 80.

<sup>33</sup> John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947) 162.

ideas and his Turner figure might be the humble 20th century man with his doubts who also struggles against the nightmarish past and is almost unable to bear the burden of the future, while trying to find consolation and seeking guidelines to the unattainable truth. Ascending from history and radiating in fiction, finally, the Turner figure is grasped by the historically conditioned reader, and this is the way it blurs the dividing line between history and fiction.

Secondly, literary critics and historians attacked Styron by claiming knowledge of the truth and the clue to history. Their views are justified if I accept the traditional definition of clue. But Styron's novel cannot be a clue to history because it does not reveal much about THE truth and it does not offer THE ultimate answer. It reveals truths and untruths to the individual reader and indicates answers. But it is even more important that it raises questions, and by doing so, fiction becomes embedded in the history in it.

His aforementioned brief talk at Wilberforce University substantiates the major implication of the novel that Styron simply tries to guide the reader in the chaotic 60s, but he also confesses that the turmoil is inexplicable. Is it inexplicable because the book indicates the mind of a 1950, white consensus conservative trying to make sense of a time and world that was leaving him behind? I am convinced that in Styron's view the reader cannot reach the core or the only one single meaning of the chaos, and Styron tries not to ultimately understand but simply to better understand the forces that shape the common destiny of blacks and whites. Ironically, this common destiny can even be manifested in hatred which is pretended unless you experience an intimate relationship with the other person. In other words the white man can be the object of the black man's hatred if they know each other.<sup>34</sup>

Thirdly, the vitriolic and visceral responses to the novel and to history seem to accept the view that episteme is superior to doxa, so a writer's description is only an opinion, whereas a scholastic view is the knowledge. A writer can express his opinion, doxa, but it is history alone which can provide knowledge, episteme, and by doing so it is the sole holder of truth.

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<sup>34</sup> Styron, 258.



The essence of this superiority lies in the speculation that episteme is rationalized and proven. Thus the historians and the literary critics try to validate their opinion by immersing it into historical knowledge. This view cannot be sustained in relation to the Turner figure because the list of opinions is the best example of how fiction can be created out of history, and thought to be history. The historians mentioned here strive to cling to facts like the Gray document, but they ignore the fact that it is personal. They emphasize egalitarian views, but, paradoxically enough, according to the novel Gray firmly believes in the “basic weakness and inferiority, the moral deficiency of the Negro character.”<sup>35</sup> Or do they agree with Gray but only from the other perspective?

Fourthly, I assume that the common element both in fiction and in history is that both the debate over the book and the transformation of Nat Turner in history in the 1960s designate the beginning of an important phase in the emancipation process of black people, which in the 1980s and 1990s peaks in the harmful side effects of political correctness<sup>36</sup> and multiculturalism, which try to monopolize the legacy of the 1960s, and in doing so have become the apotheosis of segregation. My supposition is that Styron’s work might concur with Diana Ravich’s opinion in the assertion that “the United States has a common culture that is multicultural.”<sup>37</sup>

In line with historians, the critics attack Styron’s description of Turner’s sexuality, and by rejecting the possibility for a white man to understand the black psyche they resort to counter-racism by automatically excluding whites from the blacks’ world. The question arising here is whether it is possible to fight against racial discrimination by emphasizing egalitarian views and simultaneously proclaiming racial pride, segregating groups. The voices of black militancy were growing louder in the 1960s when integration of blacks became a widely accepted national objective, and black Americans had every reason to redress the historical balance. It is small wonder that Styron’s dispassionate interpretation proved to be

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>36</sup> See—Robert Hughes, *Culture of Complaint: The Fraying of America* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993).

<sup>37</sup> Schlesinger, 135.

iconoclastic because by the time the book was published Nat Turner as a freedom-fighter cultural hero had established his reputation, and manifested itself to be the adequate hero to justify the uniqueness of the strivings of black people.

To sum up, my essay illustrates how fictionalized and malleable Nat Turner as a cultural hero is. Periodically some cultural heroes, various aspects of their lives and their personal qualities are magnified and put in the limelight, while others are thrust into the background, or completely ignored. The common feature between history and fiction is that they are both elastic and can be transformed, recast and abused conforming to the climate of opinion of the given age. The only real fact we know about him is that he was the leader of the Southampton insurrection. Not much is known about his motives and his characteristic features, and this lack of knowledge has initiated umpteen interpretations by historians and literary critics, which justifies the opinion that the clear-cut dividing line between history and fiction cannot be revealed, and history is not devoid of fiction and manipulation.

From the historian's point of view, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. confirms the same idea. "Historians must always strive toward the unattainable ideal of objectivity. But as we respond to contemporary urgencies, we sometimes exploit the past for nonhistorical purposes, taking from the past, or projecting upon it, what suits our own society or ideology. History thus manipulated becomes an instrument less of disinterested intellectual inquiry than of social cohesion and political purpose."<sup>38</sup> From the literary scholar's point of view, Zsolt Virágos concludes that literature can "effectively support or undercut, consolidate or counterpoint" the "ideologized product of social consciousness."<sup>39</sup> In *The Art of the Novel* Milan Kundera, Czech writer, reveals his views on the interrelationship between history and the fictional hero by affirming that not only should historical conditions establish the existential situation around the fictional hero, but history itself should be conceived and analyzed as an existential situation. We share our history,

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>39</sup> Zsolt K. Virágos, "Myth, Ideology and the American Writer," *Hungarian Studies in English* XXI (1990): 42.

which is our common experience, and our deeds only make sense in relation to it.<sup>40</sup> Mihály Vajda, Hungarian philosopher, assumes that history can be interpreted in lots of ways, and different interpretations might be valid, but there is not one single interpretation which should be valid.<sup>41</sup>

Styron himself did not consider his book as a historical novel, and he attached the revealing phrase “meditation on history” to the title, which implies his own rejection of omniscience. Styron’s Turner does not want to be a part of history. Instead he says that he was “propelled ... into history.”<sup>42</sup> Perhaps James Baldwin’s words vindicate an element of the truth of Styron’s fictional interpretation related to history: “He has begun the *common* history—ours.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Milan Kundera, *A regény művészete* (Budapest: Európa Könyvkiadó, 1992) 54—56.

<sup>41</sup> Mihály Vajda, *A posztmodern Heidegger* (T—Twins Kiadó, Lukács Archivum, Századvég Kiadó, 1993) 189.

<sup>42</sup> Styron, 81.

<sup>43</sup> Styron, back cover.